SILENCE

BUT IS IT DOCUMENTARY? by ORLY YADIN, JULY 2003

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The film I presented at the IWM conference in April 2001 appeared on the surface to differ from the other films or television programmes shown there. My film SILENCE (co-produced and co-directed with Sylvie Bringas) is a short animation film. It contains no archival images of the Holocaust, no interviews with survivors, experts or eyewitnesses, no shots of the locations where these events took place, and yet it is a documentary and a true story. Just as the title of this publication suggests, all forms of documentary are merely RE-presentations of reality and in that sense, an animation film is no different from any other film style.

So many films and television programmes have been made over the past 50 years about Holocaust-related experiences that when my friend Tana, a survivor, asked me in 1996 to make a film about her own story, I refused. Tana was born in 1940 in Berlin and was sent as a child to Theresienstadt. By some miraculous coincidence her grandmother had been sent separately to the same camp, found her and kept her hidden until liberation. In 1945, Grandmother and 5-year-old Tana were sent to Sweden where they had relatives. Tana's mother had died in Auschwitz but Tana did not discover the details until much later. Basically, throughout her childhood and adolescence, Tana was taught to, and made to, keep silent and not to ask questions of her relatives. Only when she left Sweden as an adult, on her journey to start a new life in the USA, did the Swedish uncle and aunt hand her a bunch of letters they had kept all these years: letters sent to them from Berlin by her mother, begging them to obtain visas for her and her baby daughter. To what extent they were responsible for not helping the family escape from Germany in time – we shall never know, but obviously, they too had kept silent. Like many survivors, Tana became adept at adapting to new surroundings and blending in. Until quite recently she even kept her concentration camp experiences from her friends. There were so many silences relating to her story – self-imposed and inflicted on others - that we originally thought of calling our film SILENCES. Eventually we decided that one generic "silence" would stand for more than the plural of the word.

Whilst I was interested in Tana's story for personal reasons, I could not imagine, initially, how to produce a film that would shed new light on survivors' experiences and how to reach out to a new audience. Apart from a couple of photographs and three letters, Tana had no visual documentation of her childhood. Apart from the Nazi propaganda film made of Theresienstadt, there was no footage that I knew of that could help illuminate her story. I was not interested in filming yet another interview with a survivor talking about events she experienced at a much younger age. So, I kept on saying no to the idea of making a film. Tana, however, was persistent. She was determined to end her silence, but didn't want to face an audience herself.

At the time I had a production company – Halo Productions - that specialised in animation films. Over 10 years I had produced a variety of animation films – almost all based on true stories or "issue" subjects. I'm not sure, therefore, why it took so long for the penny to drop. Eventually it was a conversation between myself and my partner at Halo - Sylvie Bringas – that led to a flash of inspiration and to a realization that if we could animate Tana's childhood experiences and enter the realm of imagination that way, then the film could work for us.

Before describing in more detail how we constructed SILENCE, here are a few more general thoughts about the compatibility of animation and documentary.

- Animation can be the most honest form of documentary filmmaking:

I write this partly to provoke, partly because I believe there is much truth in this statement. The power of the photographic image is so great that even the most sophisticated of we viewers easily forgets that any documentary we see on the screen is not a transparent record of life but a filmmaker's interpretation of it. This could be merely in the choice of framing and lighting, in setting up situations, or in the way the shots are edited together to give new meaning. The honesty of animation lies in the fact that the filmmaker is completely upfront about his or her intervention with the subject and if we believe the film to be true it is because we believe the intention was true. In historical documentaries, where frequently there is no suitable footage to be found of a specific event or a specific person, filmmakers choose to re-enact, to film modern day locations, to use graphics. They might even resort to using the "wrong" footage in desperation! A documentary animation film claims from the start: what you are seeing is not a photographic record but it is nonetheless a true re-presentation of a reality.

- Animation is less exploitative of its subjects:

One of the advantages of using animation when making a documentary about a living person (even when it is about their past) is that there is no danger of being uncomfortably voyeuristic. So often we see a film which penetrates into the really personal domain, into sensitive subjects (and first-hand experiences of the holocaust certainly fall into that realm) and I tend to ask myself to what extent is our interest one of real concern and to what extent a morbid and voyeuristic fascination with the subject. Adopting to use animation is a gesture of respect by the filmmaker towards the subject. It also points to the limitations of traditional documentary methods at adequately revealing the survivors' (or other personal) experiences.

- Animation can take the viewer to locations unreachable through conventional photography:

Animation can show us an unfilmed past and can enter the depths of human emotions. A child's experience of being in a concentration camp as remembered 50 years later – how to convey it? Through archival footage of children found by the allies at the end of the War? Through symbolic effects of dark and light? By filming an interview with a 60-year-old woman and trying to imagine her as little girl? Or… … by creating a child's world through animated images! This, in a nutshell, was what convinced me to proceed with developing the film. As producers of animation films, our hope was that telling the story through animation would enable us to recreate the little girl's point of view and help the audience to identify with the central character. We did not want to use clichéd archival images and did not feel that an interview with Tana could achieve the same impact. As the development of the film progressed, and the more we talked with Tana, we realised also that there were other points of view we wanted to put across. We wanted to question the war-time role of her Swedish relatives through the range of Tana's emotions, but without pointing out blame that was not proven. We wanted to show the inherent racism in Sweden – attitudes never expressed directly, but which still had an effect on a little dark-haired girl amongst her blond classmates. We tried to construct the images in such a way as to imply all this without having to spell it out. Animation is very useful for saying a lot in very few frames, and saying it ambiguously enough for the audience to bring its own interpretation and experience to the screen.

- And finally: animated characters can seem more real than actors:

Perversely, a strange thing happens with the so-called non-realistic medium animation: once we, the audience, accept that we are entering an animated world, we tend to suspend disbelief and the animation acquires a verisimilitude that drama-documentaries hardly ever achieve. In drama-documentaries, however convincing the actors

may be, the viewer never wholly forgets that they are actors standing in for someone else, someone who really existed but cannot be seen.

The process of making the film:

The background to SILENCE is the holocaust. The story itself is about a damaged childhood and the strategies for survival that an orphaned child develops when prevented from speaking out about her memories and pain. It is also the story of lost identities and the search for new ones.

Tana came to me with a poem-like piece about her childhood, co-written to music with composer Noa Ain and commissioned in 1995 by the municipality of Stockholm for an on-stage performance. This text needed to be adapted to the medium of film. It was beautiful in itself, but very long, wordy and sentimental as a sound track. Animation can condense a remarkable amount of material with utmost fluidity and the film had to be precisely 11 minutes-long (a Channel 4 commission). Gradually Sylvie and I deconstructed the poem and stripped it from sentiment and from words that could be better expressed through images. One option was to interview Tana and then edit the interview to length, but we decided that with such a short film and so much to say, the voice-over had to be scripted as tightly as the visuals were storyboarded.

We decided that the film would have two main sections with visual styles to echo the two locations of the film: Theresienstadt and Stockholm. We chose to work with two animators whose work we knew: Ruth Lingford with her black and white woodcut style images (reminiscent of Käthe Kollwitz) for the camp scenes, and Tim Webb for the colourful, crowded, Swedish part of the story. For the Swedish section, we were initially inspired by the drawings of Charlotte Salomon[i] and showed them to Tim as a guideline for the kind of cinematic framing we were interested in. We then worked on a storyboard and on re-writing the voice over. From the storyboard and a rough voice-over guide we set about hiring our team – animators and painters to flesh out the film. We recorded Tana's reading of the script only after the picture was locked. Up until the last minute, as the film was taking shape, we kept fine-tuning the words. One of our main concerns was not to spell everything out and to leave space for the spectators to bring of themselves to what they saw and heard. Throughout the whole process, we collaborated closely with Tana who commented on all our ideas. At times we walked a tight rope between respecting her sensitivities and trying to take the spectator into a more

objective, universal sphere. I'm pleased to say that my friendship with Tana survived the tensions of filmmaking.

SILENCE has been shown throughout the world – on TV, in film festivals, in schools and in museums. In Sweden it is apparently now compulsory viewing for high school kids. Reactions to the film have followed a similar pattern: a priori disbelief at the combination of "animation and holocaust" or "animation and documentary"; then very strong and emotional reactions to the film itself and an understanding of the medium we had chosen. A historical documentary, regardless of the media it uses – archival footage, dramatic reconstruction or animation - succeeds when it takes you to the heart of a historical moment and has a clear vision of what it is trying to say.

I hope we did that.

Orly Yadin
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[i] Salomon was a young Jewish German artist who kept a flamboyant visual diary of her middle class Berlin life until she was forced to escape to France where she was eventually caught by the Gestapo and sent to a concentration camp. She did not survive the war.